



## Chapter Three

# The Child's Song

*"No task must be evaded merely because it is impossible. The relevant questions are: whether it requires to be done, and whether the circumstances point a finger in one's direction."*

— William Ernest Hocking

History is a narrative, not a videotape. Facts may be objective, but narratives are not. If victors write the history then we must wonder how much of it is self-serving. Justification would appear to offer a more compelling motivation to write than seeking truth. The past changes with its interpretation. The history of the American Civil War, for example, differs if one presumes the motivation to have been economic hegemony rather than personal liberty. History is not dead. It is just awaiting revision.

My personal narrative needs no justification. None has been previously written. A history is not simply a string of facts. Facts supply data, but meaning and value comes through interpretation, by adding why and how to the what. That reflection always presumes a perspective. I hope to use honesty as the perspective here, knowing the best one can do is lean in that direction.

So I am stuck explaining things from a preconceived framework. I have more information about myself than anyone else, especially about my internal experience. That should be useful in constructing a hypothesis. But do I have the truth? No, I simply have an interpretation of the truth. But that is all anyone ever has.

My history itself is of no great importance. I have never won a Superbowl or saved a whale. Even my children are indifferent to my experience, although it affected them considerably. But I was sold through the black market and grew up around the consequences. And I have the education to cast my experience in a manner that embraces operative theoretical concepts. The adoption community pays attention to that. All three parts of the triad (adoptee/birth family/adoptive family) disagree with my perspective. And it has never been pretty. Almost everyone in that community tells me how I should feel. Few think I can figure it out myself. Perhaps they confuse illegitimacy with competency.

Actually, my life has cursory narratives, written from other people's perspectives. My adoptive parents believe they saved me from disgrace and a life of porridge. (In exchange I owed them my identity.) My birthmother, if she fit the norm, felt she gave me away out of love (a difficult concept to grasp). And adoptees see me as unwell because I cannot find my birthmother. Those are the story lines—fill in the details. Even *Second Choice*, which I wrote myself, speaks from the position of salvaging reunion.

None of these work for me any more. None of them is mine. I can borrow them and pretend in order to belong, but it never works, and I never fit in. So this narrative is from my perspective. It has nothing to do with belonging. I have given that up. My birthmother is likely dead, my adoptive parents are dead, and the adoption community might as well be. Let me be as biased as I can here. The point of this narrative is to get it right about consequences. Did my relinquishment affect me or not? And the reason that matters is that it will help me play within my limits. I will no longer have to stand on pretend when genuine is required for conviction. That should allow me to combine feeling with behavior and in the process generate confidence.

This is not about reaching back and changing the score. There is no pony, apology, or missing piece of identity. Lessons are all we get from history, but those lessons can make us more effective. I am comfortable with my life today. I have become comfortable in the category “None of the Above”. It is real for me. It works. I no longer have to pretend. That my mother loved me so much she gave me away is not a supporting wall in the construct I call my “self”.

And while I am in the business of realizing that the Emperor has no clothes, it becomes apparent that the world today is a mess. Maybe my history makes me more alert to that fact, like arthritis can anticipate changes in weather. I hope to become part of a solution, not part of the problem.

Answering to one's personal conviction might be a help in that project. So I am taking the major liability of my life (i.e., discarding my reads to protect others) and attempting to turn it to advantage—a form of mental Jujitsu. That might be pretentious, but it beats apathy. And I do not see anyone else having a greater access to reality than my own. Integrity (as well as democracy) demands that the individual be a whole person. But getting there requires that one assume responsibility for the task. Delegating responsibility does not work here, whether to a President, an idealized other, or a dead philosopher. The buck stops somewhere on the way to personal agency. No one else can run our laps for us.

So I do not intend to defer my narrative to anyone else. That is a basis for this book. I want the truth about the consequences of my experience so I can better confront the problems of today. We can't wait for someone else. And I can not delegate my tasks, whether out of fear, fantasy, or pity. That would be failing to learn from history.

So I appreciate the material help Stanley and Ann gave me. And I hope my birthmother found contentment. But that was then and this is now. There are polar bears to save. An honest narrative should help me do my part. (Exit stage left to Tom Rush's *The Child's Song*.)



I was Cartesian from the start. That is not good, but one could not blame me because most of the world is Cartesian. René Descartes believed that people are composed of two substances, mental and physical. These substances have totally different characteristics. Physical resides in time and space, mental outside it. He thought they interfaced at the pineal gland, which secreted an ethereal hydraulic substance that moved the muscles. No one buys the pineal business today, but most think we are a composite of mental and physical.

People have never been comfortable with how a concept interfaces with an object. Hope can't move mountains by itself; it needs an agent. Physicists see the external world as a closed system—only physical forces cause physical effects. In the scientific world that premise is not seriously challenged.

So how does mind affect matter? No one seems to know. Some think mind is only an illusion, that everything is physical. Some invert that idea. But no one can comfortably integrate the two. The problem lies in qualia

and agency. Qualia is a term philosophers use to describe sensations. The color green and the smell of roses do not easily reduce to neural patterns. And agency is simply non-negotiable. If we can only react but never initiate then all is lost and everyone is doomed.

What does this have to do with my history? My philosophical belief suggested that a temporary situation would eventually become permanent. That changed unpleasant to unacceptable. Let me explain, which I can attempt to do by looking at the process of starting my narrative. The logical approach might have been to organize it chronologically. But something inside me wanted to start with a kiss. There must be a reason for that. One does not have to look far.

**The Kiss:** I do not recall the kiss or anything about Julie except her name. It probably occurred in kindergarten because I would have known better by the first grade. This was not a Kodak moment. My only memories of this incident are a vision of the tooth mark she left on my nose and the realization I had to explain it to my mother. I did not become a serial kisser.

It disappoints me that nothing else remains. I must have liked the girl—it was not my style to stick pig tails into ink wells. A plausible reconstruction of the incident would start with the fact that I was glad to be in school. It contrasted with my house, where everything was constrained by the elephant we ignored. Julie was likely fun and alive, traits with which I was unfamiliar. Communication skills are learned at home, and we were functionally illiterate. I remember nothing ever said or discussed at our house in Racine. We could have been monks.

Julie was perhaps my first crush. Poetry would have worked better, but the outcome did not prove fatal. While it might be better to have loved and lost than never loved at all, I did not need that philosophical consolation. Julie was only becoming more attractive, and I had plenty of time to figure out another approach. Hope is difficult to stamp out at age five—even by elephants.

But my house was depressing. Nothing interesting happened there. We said little that mattered and talked only to cover the pretense. No one visited us. If either Stan or Ann had friends, I did not know of them. Bringing my friends over was like getting stuck in traffic on the way to the beach. Worse, it only drew attention to my own social inadequacies.

Other homes seemed to be on track to somewhere. Stanley and Ann were the god parents of my cousin Janis. She made her father promise not to die because she did not want to have to live in our house. Living there was bad enough, but it was the context that made it insufferable. Following

Descartes, albeit not reading his works, I presumed that we needed to work harder on the mental side of things. Our conversations and activities were uninspiring. Perhaps telling more jokes and starting more projects would perk things up.

The problem here, however, was not cognitive. It was dynamic. As long as my lack of biological connection, absence of legal connection, and purchase through the black-market were off limits, there was only so much to say. We would, of course, not talk about adoption all the time, but without dialogue they had to think of it all the time. Their energy went into keeping secrets. Mine went into pretending I didn't notice. Little was left for actually relating.

This was the era of Dale Carnegie (*How to Win Friends and Influence People*) and Norman Vincent Peale (*The Power of Positive Thinking*). The idea was to fill your mind with bluebirds and rainbows whereupon happy would overflow onto your life. The mind controlled the body; negative thoughts led to failure. It was a direct line, not the pineal gland perhaps, but something close. Heaven forbid life ever dealt you a bad card. I guess the honorable thing to do then would be to crawl off to the woods so as to not contaminate other people's happy projects. Either that or think positive—and alone—all the way down.

Mental exercise was the prescription for success. Life was a skill, not an experience, and we were not learning it at my house. Stories, jokes, and a happy attitude, like it or not, comprised the politically correct approach. Laugh and the world laughs with you, cry and you cry alone. Personality did not just happen, it was a practiced art. We never practiced. I feared for my future. While I was often selected to choose up teams, no one would have ever considered me the center of conversations.

Actually, it was a blessing we did not send for the above books, as all this positive stuff just breeds self-indulgence. I do not enjoy people who always feel they have to tell a joke. They always interrupt something else. And I can't smile all the time. Half of life is sad. To step over existential limitations with a smile on one's face just looks idiotic. Life is a terminal illness. Our problem is not that we fail to celebrate this fact. Our problem is that we think we must.

But positive thinking (originally Cartesian dualism; today cognitive-behavioral therapy) was the only game in town. According to that theory all the good things in life stem from a positive attitude. We did not have one in our house. I could live with the boredom—there was Julie. But if our behavior at home also reflected the wrong approach to life, then it became

more difficult. Life would then simply be a series of errant kisses. There would be no escape.

So apparently I wanted to show something about me that was not dead. The kiss was not, but that is like pleading I was drunk, not asleep at the wheel. The kiss was no doubt alive, but hardly a success. A part of me must still see the funereal tone of our home as an indictment of myself, that I am boring and have not developed the personality of interesting people—as if image is everything or at least substance follows image. It never occurred to me that people are authentic naturally, and only turn dull when something gets in the way. I presumed personality was something one had to construct by weeding out life's pesky truths. This is a dualistic, mind over matter conceptualization. Life is pictured as a sales pitch, designed to win friends and influence people—not as an honest search for common interests.

But we must go to my house now. Hopefully we will be able to learn how to avoid repeating the mistakes made there. It is not about trying harder. It is about trying smarter. And it will require a different metaphysics. But quantum theory is replacing Newtonian physics, so we are just keeping pace.